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High risk sex offenders in the community:

The case for circles of support and accountability in Scotland

Article for SCOLAG

Evidence of effectiveness

The existing evidence for the effectiveness of Circles comes from two projects, one in Canada and one in the Thames Valley in England. Evaluation of the Canadian Circles (Wilson, Picheca & Prinzo, 2005) involved a rigorous methodology, whereby 60 Circles core members were matched *a priori* to 60 members of a control group in terms of criminality, risk of re-offending, engagement in sex offender treatment programmes and time of release from prison. This ensures that the groups are as similar as possible from the beginning, so that any differences in the follow-up are most likely due to the intervention rather than other factors. Analysis of reconviction data found that the comparison group re-offended more frequently and faster than the Circles group. For sexual crimes, re-offence rates for the Circles group were significantly lower (70% lower) than that of the comparison group and significantly lower than the predicted rate of re-offending; the sexual re-offence rate for the comparison group was not significantly lower than the predicted rate. Furthermore, the Circles group had a significantly lower violent re-offence rate compared with the comparison group. Also, of the three incidents of re-offending among the Circles group, qualitative analysis showed that the severity of these offences was less than the severity of the offence for which they were originally imprisoned (e.g., an obscene phone call rather than a violent rape); there was no such reduction in severity of the offences among the comparison group. Overall this is strong evidence that the Circles were effective at reducing re-offending.

Survey data also indicated that the Circles improved core members' emotional well-being, helped them to integrate into society, and that core members believed the Circle reduced their chances of re-offending. Regarding community perceptions, a small survey of general members of the community found that 68% of respondents would feel safer if a sex offender in their local area was in a Circle than if he was not. Together this "underscores the ultimate position that [Circles] have a marked positive effect on the community integration and long-term functioning of high-risk sexual offenders [...]" (Wilson, Picheca & Prinzo, 2005).

Evaluation of the Thames Valley Circles Pilot found that, after three years, none of the 20 Circle core members had been convicted of a new sexual offence (Quaker Peace and Social Justice, 2005). However, eight of the core members were detected to have engaged in recidivist behaviour (i.e., behaviour that suggested they were about to commit an offence). As a result of this, three core members were recalled to prison, one breached his Sex Offence Prevention Order and received a new Community Rehabilitation Order, one was suspended from the Circle for three months and was then successfully reinstated into the Circle, and three were managed within the auspices of the MAPPA (Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements) and were held to account within the Circle. Of this recidivist behaviour, seven of the eight incidents (86%) were detected by the activities of the Circle. Bates, Saunders and Wilson (2007, cited in Armstrong et al., 2008) conducted a follow-up study on the Thames Valley project, investigating information on 16 core members. They found that none of the core members had been convicted of a new sexual offence, suggesting the Circle may be reducing the likelihood of re-offending. Furthermore, four core members were recalled to prison for breaching their parole license, which the authors suggest shows the effectiveness of the public protection arrangements, within which Circles plays an important part.

This provides good evidence that offending behaviour is potentially being prevented through the work of the Circles, as indicated by the absence of reconvictions for sexual offences. Furthermore, it suggests that the public is being protected and the core members are being held to account, as the activities of the Circles are detecting behaviour that might otherwise go undetected and taking action to deal with the behaviour either within the Circle or through more formal criminal justice processes, intervening before a new sexual offence occurs. The testimonies of professionals also suggested that the Thames Valley Circles have legitimacy in terms of policing, treatment and risk management, and the thorough training and vetting of volunteers ensures they are working to a reliable standard (Quaker Peace and Social Justice, 2005).

Independent research by Armstrong et al. (2008) also sought the views of stakeholders in statutory agencies. Stakeholders they spoke to in England were convinced of the effectiveness of the Thames Valleys Circles, and stakeholders surveyed in Scotland were supportive of the model, which they saw

as filling a gap in service provision. The authors suggested that Circles bring an added dimension in terms of the support and supervision of offenders, as they can help the core members develop positive social relationships and engage in constructive activities that may reduce re-offending more than traditional treatment approaches. They also highlighted the role that Circles can play in helping core members to integrate into society and that the involvement of the community may help to change simplistic media representations of sexual offenders.

Steve Kirkwood
19 August 2008

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